

Handout 1-3: Critical Questions for Exploring Texts

CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORING TEXTS	
Meaning in Texts	<p>Representation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who speaks in the text? Who is silent? Why? Whose story is told and whose isn't? Why? From whose perspective is the story told? How might other characters in the story tell it differently? Why? How are characters represented? (How are women described? What roles/jobs do Black characters have?) If you knew about young males/old people, etc. only from reading this book what would you know about them? If told from the perspective of one gender, how fair and fully dimensional is representation of characters of the other gender? If there is a male protagonist, what is his attitude toward the female characters in the text? How is this evident? How does this affect your sympathy for him? (vice versa for a female protagonist) If you are male, with what experiences, circumstances or characteristics of the female protagonist can you identify? (and vice versa)
	<p>Culture and Power:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who has power (and of what sort) in the story/film/ad? How does this power operate and change as the text progresses? What dominant social narratives are perpetuated or criticized in the text? (<i>e.g., in Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller criticizes the myth (social narrative) of the "American Dream" whereby, with hard work and individual effort, a working class man can achieve material success.</i>) To what degree does the protagonist (or other characters) believe in and live by the rules and beliefs of the prevailing social/cultural order? Why? How is this evident? How and to what degree are any specific characters' lives limited in this text? At what point(s) do characters recognize and have difficulty with the prevailing social/cultural/economic order? How do they respond? What affects their option for changing things? How do characters exercise their own power? With what consequences? What were the social and historic conditions for the characters in this text that might help us understand their motivations, actions, and desires? What additional knowledge might be required to understand social and cultural conditions described in the text?
Forms of Texts	<p>Literary Conventions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The journey is the framework in which most literature takes place (from innocence to experience, ignorance to enlightenment, bondage to freedom, etc.). What sort of journeys are made in this text? What other texts have you read that relate similar journeys? To what degree does this novel or short story follow the narrative conventions for the genre (novel, argumentative essay, short story, etc.)? To what extent does the text depart from these conventions? With what effect or implications? If (with a short text) you read this piece aloud, would meter, repetition, and style suggest an oral storytelling tradition? Is the climax linear (going through the rising/falling action toward a recognizable climax an denouement), episodic (shifting back and forth), circuitous (tales within tales), or how would you describe its movement?
	<p>Narrative closure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is the text resolved (given narrative closure) for the various characters? Does the protagonist die? Wake up from a dream? Get rescued or delivered from any crises? How predictable or surprising is the ending? How satisfying is the ending? How might you rewrite it and why, keeping in mind the character's personality, and social and historical options?

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Outside the Text	<p>Social-Cultural Context: <i>Requires students, before reading a narrative, to examine its historical and cultural contexts, and discourses (e.g., must have awareness both of the quarrel about Women & Chain of Being to understand Shakespeare's tragedies.)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose interests (cultural, economic, political, etc.) does the author seem to represent? What characters and incidents suggest such interests/values? • With whom do you think the author wants you to identify/sympathize? What in the text makes you think that? • With what character(s) do you identify or sympathize? What social factors (gender, cultural background, etc.) and experiences in your own life might cause you to read from this character's perspective and to interpret the text as you do? • Whose story isn't fully told in the narrative? How would you tell it? What's missing? • Why do you think certain texts get read in school and others don't? • What texts do you think should be taught in school? Why? • Do you think this text should be taught in school? Why/why not? • What makes a text "literary"? Why? • For you, what makes a text worth reading?
References	<p>Recommended resources for narrative questioning techniques:</p> <p>Appleman, D. "Looking through Critical Lenses: Teaching Literary Theory to Secondary Students." (1993). <i>Constructive Reading: Teaching Beyond Communication</i>. Eds. Stanley B. Straw and Deanne Bogdan. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.</p> <p>Appleman, D. (2000) <i>Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents</i>. NY: Teachers College Press.</p> <p>Thompson, J. "Helping Students Control Texts: Contemporary Literary theory in Classroom Practice." (1993). <i>Constructive Reading: Teaching Beyond Communication</i>. Eds. Stanley B. Straw and Deanne Bogdan. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.</p>
Media Resources	<p>Documentary Resources:</p> <div>  </div> <p>Afghan Stories –</p> <p>Storyline "Horried by the 9/11 attacks on America, filmmaker Taran Davies and Afghan American, Waliied Osman, set out for Afghanistan to observe how the Afghan people have survived 24 years of war." * Director/ writer: Taran Davies</p> <div>  </div> <p>Daughters of Afghanistan</p> <p>Storyline "When the hated Taliban were ousted, Afghan women felt their living nightmare was over. Now, they hope to harness the future for their daughters in the former pariah state – despite being left isolated and alone by the international community."** Directed by Robin Benger Written by Sally Armstrong and Robin Beng</p> <p>*http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0386273/ ** (http://www.nationalfilmnetwork.com/store/ProductDetails.aspx?ProductID=352)</p>

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